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Inside Report: Lafayette facing tough choices

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Acadiana bureau

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There is a lot wound up in the decision on where people choose to live, and Lafayette residents soon will be asked to grapple with some of those issues in the third round of community forums for developing a comprehensive growth plan for the parish.

People want services — police and fire protection, roads, drainage systems, schools, parks, good drinking water — no matter where they live. Those services cost money, and the farther development moves away from the core of a city, the more those services generally cost. Roads are a good example.

A home built on a vacant lot in the city of Lafayette already has ready access to a fairly good road system. But someone living in a home built in a rural area outside of Lafayette, or a rural subdivision of 100 homes, might rely on a two-lane blacktop road built years ago for farm traffic and a few country houses.

When morning and afternoon traffic begins backing up on those small rural roads, the country commuters demand bigger and better roads.

"People can build a house wherever they want, but who is going to pay for the road out there?" said Kevin Blanchard, chairman of a residents' committee overseeing the development of Lafayette's new plan.

That question has been central to growth issues facing similar cities across the country, and it's by no means a new issue in Lafayette. A 1978 planning report for Lafayette that has likely long since been forgotten offered this observation: "Lafayette seems to eat up mile after mile of its prime farm and wooded lands without a serious assessment of the costs of low-density, sprawling growth."

That assessment was made as part of a wide-ranging growth study by a group of urban planners and architects.

Thirty-five years after that planning report, a group of consultants hired by Lafayette city-parish government offered a similar assessment last year in another study of the community's growth patterns and needs.

The challenges of sprawling growth long have been apparent, but the solutions are difficult.

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New taxes in the unincorporated areas could help pay for the roads used by rural dwellers, or city-parish government could simply halt or limit new subdivisions in areas where roads and other infrastructure are lacking.

Local government could impose special impact fees on developments in incorporated areas or give some form of incentive to guide developers to areas that, for whatever reason, have not attracted much attention even though good roads are in place, such as land along the four-lane extension of Louisiana Avenue in north Lafayette.

Another option is to do nothing, which is an easy choice but one that could come with long-term consequences.

The issue is one of many to be explored in the third round of comprehensive plan community forums tentatively set for May 14 and May 15. The locations have not been set. The plan will address a wide range of issues, including recreation, drainage, fire protection, roads, economic development, and arts and culture. City-parish government has awarded a \$1.2 million contract to the firm of Wallace, Roberts & Todd to develop the plan. Any proposed regulations that emerge would need City-Parish Council approval.


For more information, visit: <http://www.lafayettela.gov/comprehensiveplan>.

Acadiana Bureau Chief Richard Burgess covers Lafayette city-parish government. He can be reached at rburgess@theadvocate.com.

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1) Comment by bourbon-soda - 04/09/2013

How can anyone write an article like this and tap dance around the screwed up charter of city-parish government? People fought tooth and nail not to be governed in the rest of the parish as in the city of Lafayette. Let 'em eat cake.

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